Gnostic Interpreters (Gnostic Revisions of Genesis Stories), Chapter I

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I

INTRODUCTION: GNOSTIC INTERPRETERS

The Apocryphon of John

In *The Apocryphon* (or *Secret Book*) *of John*[1] we more than once come across the phrase, "It is not as Moses said (….) but (thereupon a Gnostic explanation of the primordial event in question is given)".[2] This formula is characteristic of the approach to biblical traditions in *ApJohn* and in related Gnostic texts. In *ApJohn*, the corrections of the words of Moses are put into the mouth of Jesus Christ. The book claims to report an appearance of the exalted Christ to his disciple John on the Mount of Olives and to reveal Christ's secret teachings.

The first part of the revelation speaks of the eternal reality of the highest God[3] and his hypostasized thoughts or qualities (the aeons). Thereupon – in a transition to the second part of the revelation – the Christ of *ApJohn* relates the tragic story of Sophia ("Wisdom"), one of God's aeons, whose faulty behaviour led to the coming into existence of an inferior godhead.[4] This godhead, Yaldabaoth, turns out to be the creator and chief ruler of the physical world. As such he is identified with the biblical creator God. From his position outside the divine world of light he generated several

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[1] M. Waldstein and F. Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John. Synopsis of Nag Hammadi Codices II,1; III,1; and IV,1 with BG 8502,2*, Leiden, 1995.

[2] II 13.20; BG 45.9 (God's Spirit moving upon the waters); II 22.22; BG 58.17; III 29.5 (Adam's sleep); II 23.3; BG 59.17; III 29.22 (Adam's rib); II 29.6; BG 73.4; III 37.23 (the redemption of Noah).

[3] The expression "the highest God" ("the supreme God") should not be misunderstood. It does not refer to the apex in a pantheon of divine beings but to a completely transcendent God who is categorically different from all other beings called "god". Cf. M. Frede, "Monotheism and Pagan Philosophy", and below, Ch. IX.

[4] Cf. B.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, "The *Wisdom of Solomon* and the Gnostic Sophia".

cosmic powers and angels. Christ concludes this section of his mythological teaching with the following ironical statement:

> "And he (the creator God) saw the creation and the numerous angels around him, who had sprung from him. And he said to them: '*I am a jealous God* (cf. Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9); *there is no other God apart from me*'(cf. Isa. 43:11; 44:6,8; etc.). But by stating this he indicated to the angels who attended him that another God does exist. For if there were no other one, of whom would he be jealous?"[5]

Note that ego proclamations of the biblical God are quoted by the Gnostic Christ to expose the inferior qualities (jealousy, ignorance, arrogance) of the creator or demiurge.

The interest of the present study centres on the next segment of the revelation. To a certain extent, this segment, the last part of Christ's teaching in *ApJohn*, can be viewed as a rewriting of the first chapters of Genesis. Here, Christ reveals to John, among other things, the truth about the creation of Adam and Eve, Paradise, Eve's children, Noah and the Flood, and the descent of male angels to the daughters of men. As a rule, the biblical version of what happened in primordial times, or a literal understanding of the story in question, is criticized and retold.

ApJohn, "the Gnostic Bible" as it is sometimes called in scholarly literature,[6] survives in four Coptic manuscripts.[7] Three of the fourth-century Nag Hammadi codices open with this text. The fourth copy is part of another Coptic manuscript, probably dating from the fifth century, the so-called Berlin Codex.[8] In addition, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons summarizes a Greek text of the first main part of *ApJohn* in his work *Adversus Haereses* composed in about 180.[9]

Because of *ApJohn*'s distinction between a transcendent true God and an inferior demiurgical God – a distinction that indeed had far-reaching

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[5] II 13.5-13; BG 44.9-19. Biblical quotations are italicized. Cf. *HypArch* 94.19-21; *OrigWorld* 103.11-14; *GosEg* III 58.24-59.1; *TestTruth* 48.4f (cf. ch. VI); *TreatSeth* 64.19-26; *TrimProt* 43.35-44.2; *ExcTheod* 28; Irenaeus, *AH* I 5.4 (Valentinians); 29.4; 30.6 (Ophites); Hippolytus, *Ref* VII 25.3 (Basilides).

[6] M. Tardieu, *Écrits gnostiques,* Paris 1984, 10: "la bible des antibiblistes"; 26: 'la Bible gnostique par excellence'; cf. M.A. Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism'*, 8 and 198.

[7] Cf. the synoptic text edition mentioned above, n.1.

[8] Abbreviated as BG (*Berolinensis Gnosticus*).

[9] *AH* I 29. This part of Irenaeus' work is preserved in a Latin translation. A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon. Contre les hérésies*, I. Irenaeus' report provides us with a *terminus ante quem* for an early Greek version of the text.

consequences for its interpretations of Jewish Scripture and tradition – I propose the appellation "demiurgical-Gnostic" for this type of Gnostic literature.[10]

The Letter of Peter to Philip

The Letter of Peter to Philip is preserved in Nag Hammadi Codex VIII.[11] The text includes a short sermon by Peter addressed to "his disciples". The apostle begins by citing early kerygmatic formulae relating to the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The traditional profession of faith is followed by a Gnostic interpretation:

> And he (Peter) was filled with holy spirit and spoke in this way:
> "Our illuminator, Jesus, [came] down
> And he was crucified.
> And he wore a crown of thorns
> And he put on a purple robe
> And he was [crucified] upon a cross
> And he was buried in a tomb
> And he rose from the dead.
> My brothers, Jesus is a stranger to this suffering. But we are the ones who have suffered through the transgression of the Mother (Sophia)", etc.[12]

An early Christian tradition is cited and, thereupon, radically reinterpreted. Jesus is not a victim of the transgression of Sophia. As we are told elsewhere in this text, he came down into the world voluntarily in order to illuminate

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[10] I prefer this appellation to "Sethianism" (H.-M. Schenke; it is not clear why *ApJohn* should be classed with the "Sethian" texts, see below, n. 34 and chap. VII, pp. *8*), "classic-Gnostic literature" (B. Layton), and also to the designation "demiurgical-biblical" introduced by M.A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 265. Williams' designation suggests that the Gnostics in question regarded the Jewish or Christian Bible as their scripture. "Demiurgical-Gnostic literature" is an outsider's designation for it associates the Gnostics in question with the demiurgical God, a being which they detested. This designation makes sense even if the Greek term ∗0:4≅ΛΔ(H̄ does not occur in *ApJohn* and related Gnostic texts. Cf. F. Siegert, *Nag-Hammadi-Register*, 232, and E. Thomassen, "The Platonic and the Gnostic 'Demiurge'". Otherwise, the current scholarly classifications of Gnostic texts are still highly tentative.

[11] VIII,2 pp. 132-140. M.W. Meyer, *The Letter of Peter to Philip*; H.G. Bethge, *Der Brief des Petrus an Philippus*. The Greek original of the Coptic text was written during the last decades of the second century or the first half of the third century.

[12] 139.14-23.

"the fallen seed", "his own".[13] During his descent he had put on a mortal body, a product of the demiurgical God and his powers, so as not to be recognizable to these cosmic rulers.[14] Although the Saviour descended into the lower world and, therefore, suffered, his suffering is not comparable to that of the Gnostics. Therefore Peter says in the same text that they, the apostles, as representatives of the Gnostics, have to suffer more than Jesus: "lf he, our Lord, suffered, how much (more) must we (suffer)?"[15]

What we find here is that the contents of an early orthodox tradition testifying to the suffering of Jesus are subsumed entirely into a Gnostic mythical thought pattern. In this mythical transformation, Christ is the illuminator from the transcendent world. The idea that he could suffer as a physical being is rejected explicitly. He is a stranger to this suffering.

Although the main subject of the present study is the revisionary use of Genesis traditions in *ApJohn* and related texts, some attention will be paid to Gnostic reinterpretations and corrections of early Christian traditions, particularly traditions relating to the suffering and death of Jesus (see esp. chapters X-XI). We will see basically the same hermeneutical strategy at work in both the Gnostic rewriting of Genesis stories and the revisionary interpretation of early Christian accounts of Jesus' suffering and death.

The revisionary power of a Gnostic thought pattern

The authors of *ApJohn* and *LetPetPhil* read biblical and early Christian texts through the lens of their own Gnostic thought system. In itself this is not something unusual or illegitimate. Readers of religious and philosophical texts always face the task of integrating the information of the text with their own systems of values and with their own philosophies of life.[16]

The German literary theorist Hans Robert Jauß used the concept of "horizon of expectation" to elucidate the reception of texts by readers.[17] He makes it clear that the horizon of expectation operates as a frame of reference, without which the text is bound to remain meaningless. An

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[13] Cf. 136.17f and 22f.
[14] 136.20-22.
[15] 138.15-16.
[16] N.A. Dahl, "The Arrogant Archon", 698.
[17] *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*, 144-208; "The identity of the poetic text in the changing horizon of understanding". Cf. D.W. Fokkema and E. Kunne-Ibsch, *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century*, ch. 5 "The Reception of Literature: Theory and Practise of 'Rezeptionsästhetik'".

important component of the horizon of expectation is one's familiarity with other (oral and written) texts: readers and hearers assign meaning to a given text and evaluate this text in the light of what they know from other texts, especially those texts that have normative value to them or otherwise are held in high esteem.[18] Indeed, the response of Gnostics to biblical and early Christian texts was greatly determined by the relationship of these texts to their own favourite traditions. The intertextual tension between the biblical texts and their Gnostic interpretations betrays that on essential points the thought structure of the interpreters differed from what they found in the texts.

In many cases – not only in the event of Gnostics encountering a biblical or early-orthodox Christian text – the reader's frame of reference has revisionary power. This could be illustrated with many interesting examples. I shall confine myself to just mentioning the free and highly creative use of Scripture by the apostle Paul,[19] to Martin Luther's understanding of what in his view are key passages in Paul's epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans,[20] and to feminist and other liberationist approaches to biblical texts.[21] In all these cases we are dealing with readers interpreting their own religious texts. It remains to be seen to what extent the Gnostics in question regarded biblical and early-orthodox texts as their sacred literature.

The biblical stories about the creation and the first generations of humanity and early accounts of Jesus's passion and death acquired new symbolic meanings when they were connected with a Gnostic mythical thought pattern: the creator God of Genesis was transmuted into an incompetent and ignorant demiurge, and the suffering and vulnerable Jesus of the early passion accounts into the purely spiritual and therefore impassible revealer of the true God.

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[18] See also below, chap. **XIV.

[19] Cf. R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, esp.105-121. 110: "the promise in the Genesis narrative – the land and numerous descendants – is supplanted altogether by a new reading of the promise, a reading that has no discernible warrant in the text".

[20] See esp. the seminal essay by Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West".

[21] It is significant that E. Schüßler Fiorenza should call her emancipatory reading of the New Testament a "hermeneutics of suspicion", *In Memory of Her*, xxiii and 56. Cf. A.C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 411-62.

Did the critical Gnostic approach to the Jewish Scriptures originate in a Jewish environment?

The first part of the present volume (chapts II-VIII) focuses on the critical Gnostic interpretations of Genesis stories particularly in *ApJohn*. It seeks to explain why Gnostic myth-makers felt the need to disqualify the God of Genesis as an inferior demiurge and why they corrected and retold Moses' accounts of his words and deeds the way they did.

The answer sometimes given to these questions is that we are dealing with expressions of frustration and despair on the side of Jews who, faced with some crisis in history, felt abandoned by their God and finally turned away from their own tradition.[22] This view is often combined with the assumption that the critical Gnostic approach to Jewish Scripture and tradition developed in "heterodox" or "peripheral" Jewish groups in Palestinian or trans-Jordan regions, or in schools of Hellenized Jews in the Diaspora, particularly in Alexandria.[23] The theory of a Jewish background for the Gnostic myth-makers of *ApJohn* and related Gnostic texts is based on the following assumptions:

a. The surviving Coptic versions represent relatively late stages in the literary history of these documents.[24] This creates room for the supposition that, for instance, the frame story of *ApJohn*, speaking of an appearance of the Christian Saviour to his disciple John, was added at a later stage of the transmission of the text.[25]
b. The parts of the texts that concern us here, the discussions and rewritings of biblical traditions, belong to the earlier versions or sources.

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[22] B.A. Pearson, "Biblical Exegesis in Gnostic Literature", *Gnosticism, Judaism*, 38: "it is apparent that the Gnostic phenomenon itself originates in a Jewish environment as an expression of alienation from ('orthodox') Judaism". Cf. his article "Jewish Elements in Gnosticism", *Gnosticism, Judaism*, 124-35 (discussed below).

[23] G.A.G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, 9: "Gnosticism must have first appeared and developed – at least in its earlier phase – on the outskirts or fringes of Judaism". Cf. the discussion of the thesis of Jewish origins in K.L. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 175-90.

[24] Cf. M. Krause, "The Christianization of Gnostic Texts"; H.M. Schenke, "The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism", 607; Dahl, "The Arrogant Archon", 699; J.D. Turner, "Sethian Gnosticism: A Literary History".

[25] In like manner, some commentators consider the quotation of Eph. 6:12 in the opening section of *HypArch* (NHC II, 4 p. 86.23-25) and the frame story of *SophJChr* (NHC III, 4 and BG 3) as Christian additions. Cf. M. Krause, "Das literarische Verhältnis des Eugnostosbriefes zur Sophia Jesu Christi"; B. Barc, *L'Hypostase des archontes*, 45-7.

c. These early versions or sources did not yet include distinctly Christian features.[26]

Scholars claim that the apparent familiarity of the Gnostic interpreters and their intended readers with biblical and Jewish traditions, combined with the supposed absence of specifically Christian features, suggests that the hypothetical early versions and sources originated in a Jewish environment.[27]

This view of the Jewish antecedents of the Gnostic myth is elaborated in a number of recent studies. I shall confine myself here to briefly discussing Birger A. Pearson's article "Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and the Development of Gnostic Self-Definition".[28] This study has the great merit that it does not dwell upon isolated motifs or narrative ingredients but focuses on basic convictions ("the essential characteristics of the Gnostic self-understanding"). Pearson points out that one of the characteristic notions of the Gnostics behind *ApJohn*, *HypArch*, *ApocAdam*, and a few other documents, is their self-definition as the "seed," "race" or "children of Seth".[29] He proposes that these ideas concerning Seth and his Gnostic posterity are ultimately based on a sophisticated exegesis of Gen. 4:25.

But then Pearson makes the quite pertinent comment that the Gnostic use of the term "seed" and "race" includes other ideas, "by which it is possible to arrive at a deeper understanding of the Gnostic self-definition".[30] For, Pearson continues, the Gnostics saw themselves ultimately as nothing less than the "seed," "race," or "generation" of the highest God himself. He argues that with these and similar expressions "we are confronted with the

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[26] But B. Layton rightly observes that early Christians were able to read and write texts without clear references to Jesus Christ or to other distinctive marks of their own religion, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 21. Otherwise, I will argue below, ch. II, that precisely the critical Gnostic interpretation of Jewish Scripture is a Christian feature.

[27] Cf. K. King's counter-argument: "Given that by the second century there is strong evidence that Jewish literature and hermeneutical traditions were well known among certain groups of non-Jews – for example, in certain philosophical-religious circles in Alexandria, by Marcion in Rome, and by Gentile Christians in Asia Minor, all of whom were engaged in anti-Jewish polemics – the thesis of Jewish origins of Gnosticism is not required to account for the central place of Jewish materials in Gnostic myth-making", *What is Gnosticism?*, 188.

[28] *Gnosticism, Judaism*, 124-35.

[29] Cf. G.W. MacRae, "Seth in Gnostic Texts and Traditions", 21. Note that in *ApJohn* the expression "the seed of Seth" is used only once, to wit in II 9.15 and in the parallel passages in BG 36.3-4 and III 13.21.

[30] Ibid. 131.

heart and core of the Gnostic religion, the idea of the consubstantiality of the self with God".[31]

I basically agree with these observations. But what Pearson does not consider is that the self-definition "the race of Seth" might be a secondary and contingent translation of what he calls "the heart and core of the Gnostic religion", or, in my terminology, one of the basic elements of the thought pattern of Gnostic mythologizers. This is not unimportant, for Pearson connects the self-definition of Gnostics as the seed of Seth with *the earliest stages of Gnostic history*.[32]

If it is correct to draw a distinction between basic convictions and their expression in mythical language, this conclusion is not a matter of evidence.[33] While it is clear that the self-definition "the race of Seth" has a biblical or Jewish connection,[34] it is hard to see why this should also apply to the more basic idea of the divine origin and nature of the highest part of the human soul.[35]

We are able to trace the thought world of Gnostic mythopoets – the frame of reference within which they interpreted biblical and other non-Gnostic traditions – by analysing their texts. Actually, Pearson's article is a good example of such an analysis, but I doubt that his observations lead to the conclusion that any of the basic convictions expressed in Gnostic literature developed from Jewish roots.

Although I have strong doubts about the Jewish antecedents of the demiurgical-Gnostic myth, I do not go as far as Hans Jonas, one of the founding fathers of the modern study of the Gnostic thought world, who in fact makes a plea for the opposite view. In his opinion, the Gnostic myth-makers who incorporated biblical material to expose the incompetence and the wickedness of the creator and ruler of the world were motivated by anti-Jewish sentiments, or, in Jonas's biting terminology, by a "spirit of

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[31] Ibid. 132.

[32] Ibid. 133: "The dominant impulse of the early stages of Gnostic history was its attitude toward Judaism"; "it seems most plausible to conclude that the earliest Gnostics were Jewish intellectuals eager to redefine their own religious self-understanding (…)"; 134: "The essential feature of Gnosticism in its earliest history is its revolutionary attitude toward Judaism and Jewish traditions."

[33] For the contingent character of mythical language and the common thought structure underlying various narrations of a myth cf. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, I, esp. 31-54, 206-31 ("The Structural Study of Myth"), and 277-323.

[34] But note that Seth does not play a significant role in Jewish traditions. Cf. A.F.J. Klijn, *Seth in Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Literature*, Leiden 1977.

[35] Cf. my discussion of G.W. MacRae's article, "The Jewish Background", below, ch. IV, and B.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, "The *Wisdom of Solomon* and the Gnostic Sophia".

vilification, of parody and caricature, of conscious perversion of meaning, wholesale reversal of value-signs, savage degrading of the sacred – of gleefully shocking blasphemy".[36] Jonas even uses the term "(metaphysical) anti-Semitism" to characterize the Gnostic treatment of biblical and Jewish traditions.[37]

While I share Jonas's skepticism about the Jewish origin or background of the Gnostic myth, I wonder whether he is right in emphasizing the anti-Jewish character of the texts. Perversion of meaning is not an intrinsic quality of the relevant passages. Texts criticizing Moses' accounts of the deeds and words of the creator-God are burdened with anti-Jewish – and anti-Christian! – connotations if they are connected with a horizon of expectation in which the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament, is a dominant factor. This must be presupposed in Jewish readers (and Gentile sympathizers with the Jewish tradition) in the ancient world as well as in any modern reader who is brought up in Western civilization, but the frame of reference of Gnostics may have been quite different. It was not determined by the Jewish Bible but by their own traditions. The myth of origins, including the rewritings of Genesis stories, confirmed Gnostic readers and hearers in their understanding of the demiurgical God and his devices, and it helped them to realize that they had basically nothing to fear from him.[38]

Although the polemical undertones of the Gnostic Genesis interpretations are evident (see chapter II), were these polemics directed against Jewish monotheists? For the time being, I would like to recall that we find the most violent attacks against the Jewish Bible, its God and its heroes

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[36] "Response to G. Quispel's 'Gnosticism and the New Testament'", 287. See also id., *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist,* I, 216-23; *The Gnostic Religion*, 91-5.

[37] Ibid., 288 with reference to R.McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, 172-255, p. 184: "anti-Semitism may also have contributed to the depreciation of the God of the Jews"; 188: "the fact that the Demiurge is frequently equated with the God of the Old Testament suggests the influence of anti-Semitism." Jonas surmises that the confrontations with Judaism took place very early, "perhaps even right from the beginning of the (Gnostic) movement" (289); cf. *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, 227-33; "Delimitation of the Gnostic Phenomenon", 101f.; Dahl, "Arrogant Archon", 706; N. Brox, *Offenbarung, Gnosis*, 52.

[38] Dahl, 692: "paraphrase and reinterpretation of the early chapters of Genesis made it possible to argue that they (the Gnostics) possessed a higher wisdom than did the creator of the world and that their inner self was of a higher nature than he". See below, ch. XIV.

in texts that were purportedly addressed to other groups of Christians[39] –Christian believers, that is, who held the Old Testament in high esteem.[40]

A dual hypothesis

The present study does not start from the *familiarity* of Gnostic authors with biblical traditions but from the other side of the same picture, their *critical treatment* of these traditions. Critical, revisionary and resistant interpretation is likely to indicate that there is a gap between the thought pattern of the interpreter and the text as he or she understands it. If we bear this in mind we have no reason to connect the critical rewritings of biblical texts with any form of Judaism. It is more plausible that we are dealing with non-Jewish intellectuals with a background in Hellenistic schools of thought[41] who evaluated biblical and other non-Gnostic traditions in the light of their own religio-philosophical world view. Where the information of the books of Moses was supposed to deviate from their favourite theological and anthropological ideas they apparently did not hesitate to correct or to reject the biblical accounts: "Is is not as Moses said (…)".

This hypothesis may give rise to some objections. Why would Gnostic authors with such a background have referred to biblical traditions? Why did they bother to correct Moses and not just ignore him?[42] How can we explain that non-Jewish authors had detailed knowledge of biblical traditions?

I will consider the possibility that the critical approach to biblical traditions originated in basically the same historical context as the Gnostic reactions to early orthodox accounts of Jesus's suffering and death: while the latter texts developed from controversies among early Christians about the person and the mission of Jesus Christ, the critical approach to Genesis stories and other biblical texts and concepts may have originated from

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[39] Notably *TreatSeth* (NHC VII,2) and *TestTruth* (NHC IX,3).

[40] P. Nagel, "Die Auslegung der Paradieserzählung in der Gnosis", in K.W. Tröger (ed.), *Altes Testament–Frühjudentum–Gnosis*, 49-70; H.G. Bethge, "Die Ambivalenz alttestamentlicher Geschichtstraditionen in der Gnosis", esp. 104-7; B. Pearson, "Use, Authority and Exegesis of Mikra in Gnostic Literature", 639-41 (= Pearson, *The Emergence of the Christian Religion*, 104-7).

[41] Cf. A. D. Nock's well-known statement, "Gnosticism is Platonism run wild", "Gnosticism", *HTR* 57 (1964), 266; H. J. Krämer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik,* 223-64; H.J.W. Drijvers, "The origins of gnosticism", 340-6; K. Rudolph, "Griechisch-hellenistische Ableitungsversuche", 33-48.

[42] I. Gruenwald, "Aspects of the Jewish-Gnostic Controversy", 717.

intra-Christian debates about the proper understanding of the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament.[43] This would mean that the intellectuals behind demiurgical-Gnostic texts discussing biblical traditions were Christians. These Christians used biblical stories and concepts with a view to exposing the inferiority of the demiurgical God and the ignorance of those fellow Christians who continued to worship this God and to attach value to the texts testifying to his greatness and holiness.

In his *The Gnostic Scriptures*, Bentley Layton likewise points to the Greek-philosophical undercurrent of what he calls classic Gnostic literature and to the Christian character of the surviving texts.[44] While the double hypothesis of the present study is in substantial agreement with Layton's position, it differs from the position held by Simone Pétrement in her monographic study *Le Dieu séparé: les origines du gnosticisme*.[45] My main problem with her approach is that she does not sufficiently account for the wide variety of early Christian beliefs in the period before the end of the second century.[46] I agree with Pétrement that the authors and the intended readers of the relevant texts were Christians, but I do not see reasons to assume that their beliefs evolved from Pauline or Johannine ideas or from other ideas expressed in texts that were later canonized.[47] Rather it is part of my hypothesis that the Gnostics authors under discussion were guided by Greek-Hellenistic ways of thinking *before and after* they came to believe in Jesus (as a messenger of the fully transcendent God of their

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[43] Gnostic as well as Patristic sources bear testimony to serious disagreements between Christian groups about these issues. More often than not, the criticism of the beliefs of the other party was put in polemical and accusatory language. Cf. K. Koschorke, *Die Polemik der Gnostiker gegen das kirchliche Christentum*, and below, chap. II.

[44] Pp. 5 and 8: "The formulation of the Gnostic myth ultimately drew on Platonist interpretations of the myth of creation in Plato's *Timaeus*, as combined with the book of Genesis." But note that in demiurgical-Gnostic texts, the Genesis traditions are treated differently from interpretations of Plato's creation myth. For the Christian character see p. 20: "the Gnostics were a sect or movement of Christianity", and passim.

[45] Paris, 1984; Engl. transl: *A Separate God. The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, San Francisco 1990.

[46] Her approach can be compared to that of the ancient heresiologists who maintained that the Gnostic doctrines deviated from the allegedly one and only Christian truth and therefore must be qualified as secondary aberrations. Cf. K. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 136, n. 115.

[47] *A Separate God,*10: the attribution of creation to an inferior and blind Demiurge "was brought about within and by Christianity, the crucifixion of Christ, the Pauline theology of the cross"; 24: "the Gnostics of the first half of the second century wished to be faithful to Paul and John, and (…) in certain ways they were more faithful to them than their orthodox contemporaries."

philosophical tradition).[48] They came from a different background and drew from different sources than other early Christians.

The scope of this investigation

The syncretistic character of *ApJohn* and other demiurgical-Gnostic writings cannot be denied. But qualifying them as syncretistic does not relieve us of the task of finding out what motivated the authors in their adoption and adaptation of heterogeneous materials. The greater part of the present book is a search for the basic convictions of the Gnostics behind the texts and for the organizing principle in their mythical argumentation.

Chapters II-VIII will concentrate on *ApJohn*, more precisely on those parts of the book in which the Gnostic Christ refers to biblical traditions.[49] I hope that this study will shed some more light on the ideological background of the intellectuals who composed and read *ApJohn* and comparable demiurgical-Gnostic texts, on the historical context and function of their critical Bible interpretations, and on their relations to emerging mainstream Christianity. The interest will not only be focused on the Gnostics behind the texts as *authors* but also and first and foremost as *readers*: how did they understand biblical texts or, for that matter, second-hand interpretations of biblical texts? Chapter II deals with the historical context and the polemical function of the critical Genesis interpretations in *ApJohn*, chap. III with the philosophical undercurrent of *ApJohn*'s mythical arguments, chap. IV with the narrative scheme of the Gnostic myth as it is presented in this document. Chapters V-VIII examine interpretations and rewritings of individual Genesis stories. Chapter IX discusses Gnostic theology, starting from the question of whether Gnostic authors also

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[48] It is attractive to see in the "pneumatics" addressed by Paul in his first Letter to the Corinthians remote predecessors of second-century Gnostic intellectuals.

[49] This examination belongs to what W.C. van Unnik defines as the first phase of scholarly research after the publication of the documents, "Gnosis und Judentum", 69: "Fest steht jedenfalls, dass man jede Schrift für sich zu betrachten hat und nicht alles unter einen Generalnenner 'gnostisch' bringen kann. Was hier als erste Phase der Erforschung nach der an sich schon schwierigen Veröffentlichungen geschehen muss, ist die genaue Exegese und Auswertung jeder einzelnen Schrift." Cf. more recently the remark by E. Pagels, "After fifty years of Nag Hammadi study we are finally learning (…) tp drop generalizations (…) and speak instead about specific texts" ("Ritual in the *Gospel of Philip*", 280).

referred to Old Testament texts and concepts when they spoke about their fully transcendent true God.

Chapters X-XII deal with Gnostic interpretations of early Christian texts and traditions about the teaching of Jesus, and about his suffering and crucifixion. Chapter XIII discusses the use of Johannine language in some Gnostic texts. An epilogue (XIV) is devoted to a discussion of the ways in which Gnostic texts were understood – and are understood – by various categories of readers. I add an appendix about the baptists of Mani's youth.